

Enhancing the Learning Experience for Millennial Developmental Students

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The values and needs of today's college students are different from the needs of students from past generations. It is important that developmental educators recognize the characteristics of these students in their classroom and develop strategies to address their needs. This article focuses on the characteristics of the Millennial student, as compared to characteristics of students from past generations. In addition, implications of having these students in the developmental classroom and best practices and activities that may be implemented to address their needs are discussed.

Comparison of Generations

Today's generation of traditional-age college students, referred to as the Millennial generation (1980-present), is very different from past generations. These individuals (hereafter referred to as "Millennials") have life experiences and values unlike individuals from previous generations.

The characteristics of the Millennial generation have been organized under seven categories: Technology-savvy, Conventional, Special, Sheltered, Confident, Achieving, Pressured, and Team-Oriented. A brief historical review identifies the ways in which these characteristics distinguish Millennials from previous generations (Howe, 2000).

Persons born during the G.I. Generation (1901-1924) lived through the Great Depression and experienced the stock market crash and World War II. Because this generation dealt with many hardships, this generation was thought to consist of persons with well-developed reasoning and problem-solving skills (Howe & Strauss, 1991). By contrast, Millennials are known to be "technology savvy," developing their problem-solving skills in part through

their interaction with video games and Internet use. The Internet has always existed in their world. Unlike previous generations, Millennials have had access to instant information via extensive cable stations, the media, and the Internet. Consequently, these students have learned to process information by first asking, “How is this relevant to me?” This practice of searching for instant and relevant information can often lead to impatience when Millennials’ needs are not being met (Lewis, 2010).

The Silent Generation (1924-1945) is comprised of individuals who were born during the Great Depression and became young adults too late to become involved in World War II. Howe and Strauss (1991) have described this generation as conformists who are adaptive to change and difficulties they may face. In some ways, the Millennial generation is similar to the Silent generation, as Millennials have been characterized as “conventional” and comfortable believing in the values established by their parents. Like members of the Silent generation, Millennials are known to welcome parent involvement and advice, and excel when they have rules to follow (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

The Baby Boomer generation (1945-1964) was named for the large number of births that took place during this time period. Many of these individuals were raised by stay-at-home moms. They were taught to be independent and to believe that they had a hand in shaping their own future (Mitchell, 2005). In comparison, many Millennials have been raised by parents who postponed parenthood to first develop their careers and attain financial security (Decoding the digital Millennial, 2006). This delay and intentional launch of families may have led to the observation that Millennials sense they are “special,” both individually and as a group (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

The generation born between 1965 and 1980 (Gen Xers) grew up during a time of political tension and are thought to be skeptical about the world. Many children in this generation stayed home alone after school to take care of themselves while their parents worked, and were tagged “Latchkey Kids.” Single-family homes became more common in this generation. Because of the independence of their Gen Xer parents, Millennials have also tended to be independent individuals (Meeting the needs of

Millennial students, 2007-8). Paradoxically, Millennials have also been characterized as “sheltered” and highly protected, perhaps because of the societal changes that occurred during their parents’ generation. For example, the Millennial generation has lived with an abundance of child-safety equipment. Surveillance cameras, visitor management systems, and limited access doors are part of increased safety measures that have been implemented in high schools following the Columbine High School attack (Trump, 2009).

Millennials also have a strong sense of self-worth and “confidence” (Howe, 2003). These individuals have been raised by parents who emphasize self-esteem. As a result, many college Millennials are “achieving” students who feel pressured to succeed. They have been encouraged by their Gen Xer parents to study hard and attend college to prepare for a career that pays off (Howe & Strauss, 2000). According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems Information Center (2009), 63% of United States 2008 high school graduates went directly from high school to college, up from 53% of 1992 high school graduates. While trends show that this generation has a strong sense of achievement, there is also evidence of a drop in student commitment to course work preparation (Sax, 2003). Regardless, this generation is optimistic about going to college and about doing well academically (Sax, 2003).

In summary, Millennials are characterized as a generation that practices conformity over individualism, and they prefer “team-oriented” activities with friends over creative tasks on their own. They strive to stay connected with their friends by texting and social networking. Most are involved in extracurricular, organized and “group-oriented” activities (“Decoding the digital Millennial,” 2006).

Implications and Best Practices

Recognizing these characteristics associated with Millennials—achieving, special, sheltered, pressured, conventional, and team-oriented—can assist developmental educators to use classroom strategies that enhance the learning process for these students.

Achieving

Goal-oriented, relevant activities can be incorporated

into developmental courses to address the desire of Millennial students to achieve. One activity that instructors can incorporate into the first day of a course is to ask students to reflect on their goals for the semester and identify obstacles that might get in the way of achieving these goals. Examples of obstacles that students frequently acknowledge include long commutes, nervousness about doing well in the course, and involvement in a sports team that may require many extra hours of practice, and games that may require the student to miss classes. This reflection activity can be extended to include an additional step in which students work in groups to brainstorm and determine ways to address these obstacles. More often than not, developmental students recognize that time management is the remedy to many of their problems, as well as visiting the college learning center for assistance. Although most of these solutions may appear obvious, the process of engaging students in the problem-solving process fosters more meaningful solutions and reinforces the positive impact that shared practices can have on the learning process.

Similarly, end-of-the semester activities can help students to focus on their goals. In another reflective, application-based exercise, faculty can review the grading scale for the course and assign students to calculate their grades going into the final exam, including determining what score they need on the final to earn the grade they want. By completing this exercise, both instructors and students benefit. Instructors learn of any significant misperceptions students might have and can address student concerns prior to the final exam. This process also helps to eliminate surprises for students when final grades are posted.

Confident

Because Millennials tend to be confident about their strengths, they are not always aware of their weaknesses. Therefore, students benefit from frequent instructor feedback. In addition to administering weekly quizzes and collecting homework, faculty can take advantage of campus-wide programs that provide mechanisms to inform students of their progress.

Some colleges provide an on-line mid-semester grade and progress report with the option of making such comments as “making progress,” “low test scores,” “poor writing skills,” and

“seek tutorial help.” Many campuses also have early alert systems to identify students who are experiencing difficulty in their courses. When such systems provide reports to a staff person responsible for advising at-risk students, the impact on student success can be noticeable¹. If an instructor’s college does not have these mechanisms, instructors can still contribute to the success of their Millennial students by providing progress reports in class, via email, letters, or phone calls.

Special

Feeling “special” is another characteristic of the Millennial generation. Millennials feel more special when they sense that their professors care about their performance and success. A first step is for professors to know each of their students’ names. Faculty can also build a relationship with students by providing an incentive (such as quiz or homework points) for students who see them outside of class or for students who document use of the learning center to work on correcting mistakes in work that has been graded and returned to them. Students at Virginia Wesleyan have shared positive comments on their course evaluations that these options allowed them to boost their grade, helped them better understand course material, and prepared them for future quizzes and tests.

Sheltered

In addition to feeling special, today’s Millennial college students value their parents’ advice and welcome their involvement. With email, text messaging, and cell phones, communication between students and parents can take place on a daily basis. Many Millennials are not only at ease with this relationship, they also expect parents and college employees to take care of any problems they may face (Meeting the needs of Millennial students, 2007-8). It is important that faculty members are aware of the connection between parent and student and acknowledge the role of parents in a student’s life. If an instructor is confronted by a

¹According to Keith Moore, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Virginia Wesleyan College, Norfolk, VA, it is believed that implementing the early alert system in fall 2009 contributed to a 5% rise in the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate. Personal communication, February 16, 2010.

parent regarding a student concern, the instructor should educate the parent on the course structure and policies and remind the parent that the instructor also wants the student to succeed (Lewis, 2010). Before offering academic information to parents, faculty should reference their college registrar's office to make sure they are in compliance with the Family Rights and Privacy Act guidelines for disclosing student information.

Pressured

This parent involvement often leads to students feeling pressured to succeed, which in turn can lead to increased cheating among Millennials. Research indicates high levels of cheating in high schools (McCabe, 2005). Although today's students are characterized as rule followers, they often try to justify cheating by claiming that high school is simply a hurdle they must overcome to reach college. They may value little of what they learn or believe that because their peers cheat, cheating is acceptable.

These attitudes and habits continue as students reach the college campus (McCabe, 2005) and require campuses to address the issue of academic honesty with students. According to McCabe (2005), a strong correlation exists between high levels of cheating and campuses that do not facilitate active dialog about academic honesty among students. Steps that can be taken include posting the college's honor code in each classroom and beginning the first day of class with an explanation of this code, followed by a discussion on academic integrity. In addition, to decrease incidents of cheating, instructors should reinforce proctoring during tests, and consider allowing a reference sheet to be used during tests (McCabe, 2005).

To offer a balance to the structure-seeking Millennial student, instructors can offer activities that address a student's creative side by implementing a journaling grade component. Journal entries can include reflections related to study skills, mathematics or English concepts and skills, study preferences, and questions such as, "What advice would you give someone taking this class for the first time?" This process integrates writing and reflection, provides a mechanism for the student to summarize ideas, and offers a means of communication between the instructor and student.

Conventional

Millennial students have also been characterized as conventional and tend to be rule followers who prefer structure (Howe & Strauss, 2000). On the other hand, because they feel pressured to succeed and tend to be very self-confident, they are not afraid to question or challenge rules. Millennial developmental students who feel pressured to succeed and confident at the same time are not afraid to question or challenge rules. In addition, they may be vocal when their needs are not being met. The students who exhibit this behavior seem to reflect a strong sense of "entitlement" (Lewis, 2010). To address these behaviors and help developmental students succeed, faculty should provide a detailed syllabus that outlines clear course goals and expectations. Consequences of not meeting each expectation should also be included (Lewis, 2010). For example, if cell phones are not allowed in a class, a statement regarding what would happen as a result of a student using a cell phone in class should also be clearly stated. It is also important for the instructor to show consistency in following through on the consequence. Giving quizzes over the syllabus helps to ensure that students have read these policies.

Team-Oriented

Millennial students are team-oriented. To take advantage of this attribute, faculty should incorporate group work into the developmental classroom setting when possible. Many research studies have shown that students working together to accomplish shared learning goals can be more effective than competitive and individualistic efforts (Johnson, D. & Johnson, R. 2000). Developmental instructors who become skillful in creating and managing group activities will find that they are creating a positive learning environment.

Offering a daily group work grade is one way to take advantage of the team-oriented characteristic of the Millennial developmental student. Giving students credit for successfully completing problems while working in groups each class day, related to material presented in the lesson, provides students with added incentive to attend class each day (rather than serving as punishment for recorded absences), and provides them with an

opportunity to better understand the lesson and enhance their social skills.

Conclusion

Millennial students have characteristics that are unlike students in previous generations. These differing characteristics create unique obstacles that may hinder the academic success of today's college students, particularly those enrolled in developmental classes. Faculty can address these obstacles by being aware of these distinctions and implementing activities and practices in the classroom that address the needs of Millennial students.

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